

# How not to be religious

**Matthew 6:1-6; 16-18**

Most of us will be familiar with the phrase ‘keeping up appearances.’ For some of us, it will immediately conjure up memories of the BBC sitcom of the same name, the story of the pretentious and snobbish Hyacinth Bucket. For others, it is simply shorthand for an approach to life which focuses on what can be seen by others at the expense of what’s going behind closed doors, what’s really taking places in our homes and in our hearts.

In the opening verses of Matthew 6, we find Jesus addressing the internal/external divide with regard to three issues which would have been seen by any first-century Jew as being central to living out their faith: giving to the needy, praying and fasting. Gerard Kelly notes that, ‘Just as ‘churchgoing’ has become the accepted mark of faith in our age so, to the Jews, these three things marked out piety. And it went further than that. Because these three activities were seen as the trinity of piety, because they were seen as signs of holiness, it was their public expression that became important. Like householders competing to have the best display of Christmas lights, people would vie for the most pious public image.’<sup>1</sup>

It's important to note that at no point in these verses does Jesus question the importance of these practices. There seems to be a clear implication in his teaching that his followers will continue to do these things. But what matters is the way in which we do so: are we acting privately with an attitude that if God sees what we do that is enough, or are we motivated by the adulation and respect of other people?

The Old Testament law emphasises the importance of concern for the needs of the poor in passages such as Deuteronomy 15:7-11. In the first-century the practice was well-established, with structures for giving and the distribution of gifts to the poor which offered levels of support not dissimilar to our own welfare systems. In Matthew 6:2 Jesus speaks out against those who announce their giving with a fanfare of trumpets. This is undoubtedly a case of exaggeration for effect. There is no evidence of such practices taking place, but rabbis did warn against ostentatious displays of giving which suggests that some people were guilty of drawing undue attention to themselves in this regard.

Jesus does not deny the importance of giving, but he does call upon his disciples to practise it in a new way, with the emphasis being on secrecy. The memorable exhortation of verse 3, ‘do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,’ presses home the point he is making. A pair of hands belongs to the same person so in a literal sense keeping this command seems impossible, but the statement helps us to realise how important privacy is.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 47

This emphasis on privacy is made clear in Jesus' teaching on each subject: giving, praying and fasting. Along with the stress on secrecy, there is also a reminder that an audience of one is the only one which matters. Humans might not be aware of what we're doing, but they don't need to know. Our actions are seen by God, who is a loving Father and who will reward us for what we have done. In verses 4, 6 and 18 we find the same words: 'Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.'

As Tom Wright notes, 'Jesus doesn't say what kind of reward we should expect. That, too, is part of the point. Simply knowing God better is reward enough; but there may be other things as well. You never know till you try. What is clear is that he is inviting his followers to a life in which inside and outside match perfectly because both are focussed on the God who sees in secret.'<sup>2</sup>

### **For discussion**

1. In these verses Jesus repeatedly refers to God as 'your Father.' How does relating to God in this way change your understanding of what matters most when it comes to these issues of giving, praying and fasting?
2. Can you think back to times in the past when you have given to someone in secret? You don't need to share the details... if you do, it won't be a secret anymore! But can you share with others the impact this had on you? In what way did giving in secret feel different to giving in a way which was noticed by others?
3. How would you respond to someone who argued that Jesus' instructions in verses 5-6 mean that we should not gather with other Christians to pray aloud and publicly?
4. What experiences have you had of fasting, either as an individual or collectively with other believers? In what ways do you feel God worked in your life as a consequence of fasting?
5. Commenting on this passage, Gerard Kelly writes, 'It has become fashionable in our own age to substitute other forms of voluntary abstinence for the more traditional idea of going without food. Some talk of fasting from television, from alcohol or from sex. There are doubtless great benefits in any and all of these, but it has to be said that the teaching given here does not indicate them. Fasting was taken in Jesus' day to mean abstinence from food, and that has been its primary meaning over the centuries. This arises almost certainly from the recognition that of all the human appetites, the appetite for food is central.'<sup>3</sup> Do you agree? As Lent begins, and you reflect on what you might be giving up for the next 40 days, do you think there is a value in abstaining from things other than food and drink?

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1*, 2002, 56

<sup>3</sup> Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 63